

Sebastian Schmitt

Fifties Nostalgia in Selected Novels of
Philip Roth

Bernd Engler, Michael Hochgeschwender, Günter Leypoldt,
Udo Sautter, Oliver Scheiding (Hg.)

Mosaic

Studien und Texte zur amerikanischen
Kultur und Geschichte

Band 60

Sebastian Schmitt

**Fifties Nostalgia
in Selected Novels
of Philip Roth**

 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Schmitt, Sebastian:

Fifties Nostalgia in Selected Novels of Philip Roth / Sebastian Schmitt. -

Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017

(Mosaic ; Vol. 60)

Zugl.: Diss., Universität Trier, 2017

ISBN 978-3-86821-740-7

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017

ISBN 978-3-86821-740-7

No part of this book, covered by the copyright hereon,
may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means
without prior permission of the publisher.

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504

Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>

E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

Contents

Preface	vii
1. Introduction: Constraints of the Imagination.....	1
1.1 The American Fifties	9
1.2 Symbolic Convergence Theory	13
1.3 The Containment-Subversion-Theory of American Dissent	16
1.4 The American Jeremiad and Fifties Nostalgia.....	25
2. <i>Indignation</i> : “The Unpronounceable Sentence Pronounced”	31
2.1 American Individualism in a Changing World.....	34
2.2 Metatextual Dimensions: A Voice from Beyond the Grave.....	60
2.3 Slaughterhouse America	78
2.4 The Ideological Framework of <i>Indignation</i>	88
3. <i>I Married a Communist</i> : “In Gossip We Trust”.....	92
3.1 Dissenters in an Age of Conformity	110
3.2 <i>I Married a Communist</i> and the Culture Wars	125
3.3 Novelistic Experiments with Autobiography	139
3.4 The Ideological Framework of <i>I Married a Communist</i>	150
4. <i>Sabbath’s Theater</i> : “You are America”	153
4.1 The American Malaise.....	156
4.2 <i>Theatrum Mundi</i>	174
4.3 The Ideological Framework of <i>Sabbath’s Theater</i>	186
5. The Past Undetonated	189
6. Works Cited	194
Abbreviations.....	209

Preface

This study investigates the significance of a formative period in American history for Philip Roth's writing: the American fifties. Nostalgia for this "golden age" still plays an important role in popular and political discourses in the United States. In three case studies, this book analyses how Philip Roth engages with fifties nostalgia in his novels *Indignation*, *I Married a Communist* and *Sabbath's Theater*. These novels are not simply set in the American fifties, they are essentially about this historical period which still captures the American imagination. Contextual close readings of the individual texts illuminate how these novels are pervaded by a specific rhetorical structure, the American jeremiad, and how this allows Roth to dramatize a specifically Jewish-American form of Americanization. By investigating the functions of fifties nostalgia in his novels, the present study sheds light on the means with which Roth appropriates American history as a form of dissent in his writing and how he appropriates the American fifties to engage with contemporary political discourses in American culture. This serves to reveal the imaginative and ideological constraints that Roth contends with in his novels.

Writing this book has been a very long and often arduous process which would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of my colleagues, friends and family. I am particularly grateful for the ongoing support, patience and love of my wife Victoria. I would also like to thank my parents Karola and Rainer Schmitt as well as my sister Hanna for their supportive words throughout the years. Finally, I would like to express my special gratitude to Prof. Dr. Gerd Hurm (*Trier Center of American Studies*, University of Trier) on whose initiative I started writing the book and who has encouraged and advised me over the years.

1. Introduction: Constraints of the Imagination

I sometimes think of my generation of men as the first wave of determined D-day invaders, over whose bloody, wounded carcasses the flower children subsequently stepped ashore to advance triumphantly toward that libidinous Paris we had dreamed of liberating as we inched inland on our bellies, firing into the dark. ‘Daddy,’ the youngsters ask, ‘what did you do in the war?’ I humbly submit they could do worse than read *Portnoy’s Complaint* to find out.

Writing and the Powers That Be, An Interview with Philip Roth (Reading Myself 7).

Finally: ‘rebellling’ or ‘fighting’ against outside forces isn’t what I take to be at the heart of my writing. [...] Over the years, whatever serious acts of rebelliousness I may have engaged in as a novelist have been directed far more at my own imagination’s system of constraints and habits of expression than at the powers that vie for control in the world.

Writing and the Powers That Be, An Interview with Philip Roth (Reading Myself 11-12).

From September 1969 to May 1970, a long series of terrorist bombings shook the American public. This was left-wing terror, perpetrated by radical groups like the *Weathermen* who believed in violent revolution to stop the fighting in Vietnam and to overthrow what they considered an imperialist U.S. government. The targets were public buildings such as federal buildings, draft boards, or townhouses and this series of attacks turned out to be the terrible climax of several years of public unrest in the United States (cf. Patterson, *Grand Expectations* 716-17). As it happens, the novelist Philip Roth, whose *Portnoy’s Complaint* had caused a public scandal of quite another sort a few years earlier, was personally acquainted with the parents of one of the Greenwich Village bombers, Kathy Boudin. He wrote a couple of pages about the incident in the early 1970s – nothing but a few ideas for a concept of a novel, but over the years he often returned to these notes as a source of inspiration. It took him more than twenty years until he finally decided to transform the ideas into a novel. The *Weathermen* and the terror that they and others brought to American streets indeed became the key inspiration for this new work, which was published under the title *American Pastoral* in 1997 and which won him the Pulitzer Prize (Roth Pierpont 206-7).

Seymour Levov, former athlete and wealthy owner of a textile factory, is the protagonist and it is his daughter who detonates the bomb which blows his serene life and dreamy vision of America into fragments. As Debra Shostak has shown, the blown-up post office in *American Pastoral* is not only a reminder of these terrifying months in the late 1960s, but more importantly a symbol of a nostalgic vision falling apart – the realization that the American idyll, the golden postwar decades, have never existed. It stands for the sim-

mering conflicts underneath the idyllic surface of the American 1940s and 1950s, before they came to the fore in the 1960s. The explosion that drives the plot in *American Pastoral* explodes the dream of a lost sense of union and community in American culture and exposes it as nothing but myth (Shostak, *Philip Roth* 244-45). Seymour Levov's brother Jerry calls it the "past undetonated", an irretrievable dream of pure "nostalgia" for a better America that cannot be retrieved, because it was blown to pieces in 1968 (*AP* 61). It is this nostalgic vision, this "undetonated past", its functions in Philip Roth's writing as well as its determinants that will be the subject of this thesis. Whereas this "undetonated" past itself plays only a minor role in *American Pastoral*, in which Roth scrutinizes the American sixties, the "undetonated" fifties take centre stage in several closely related novels: *Sabbath's Theater*, *I Married a Communist* and *Indignation*. It is in these novels that Roth takes a close, critical look at the American fifties and the nostalgic longings which they have since then inspired.

His approach to the issue of nostalgia is in some ways paradoxical, which is not untypical. Not only is Roth's work itself suffused with paradoxes and ambiguities, but also Roth's own statements about his work and his approach to writing often contain statements which are inconsistent. The two quotations above, from an interview in 1974, illustrate this point. On the one hand, Roth seems to suggest in an ironic and metaphoric tone that his writing is essentially "liberating". Its purpose is to engage readers with the wrongs in society, in this case the sexual mores prior to the upheavals of the 1960s. On the other hand, Roth undermines this seemingly straightforward statement by adding that his writing should not be confused with some form of political or social activism. What may seem to be an unintended inconsistency is a paradoxical pattern that has occurred repeatedly in Roth's public statements about his writing, for instance with respect to his own ethnic identity or the relationship between his writing and his readership (cf. Brauner, *Philip Roth* 13-15). In a more recent interview from 2008, Roth describes his impulses to write *Indignation*: "If you look in the newspaper at the names and ages of the soldiers getting killed in Iraq now, you find these terrifying ages like 19 and 22; it's just awful. And it was that particular awfulness of young death that engaged me". Later on in the same interview, Roth comes back to the aspect of topicality and rejects the idea that his novels have anything to do with current issues in American politics: "There is no relevance between my books and what's going on. I see what's going on like any other voter, or potential voter, or citizen, which is I get appalled, I get angry, I get frightened, and so on" (Mustich 2008). Consciously or not, Roth's ambivalent judgements about his own writing foreground the paradox at the heart of his work.

There is a deeper meaning behind the paradox with regard to Roth's writing and to American literature in general. For David Brauner it illuminates the intricate relationship between public and private in Roth's fiction. It is the "political zeitgeist" which leads Roth to engage himself with the limits of his own imagination and thus inspires him to produce "inflammatory" fiction that challenges cultural norms (Brauner, *Philip Roth* 19). It is this idea, from which the present study takes its point of departure. It aims to explore the cultural dimensions of Roth's preoccupation with what he has himself described as his "imagination's system of constraints and habits of expression" (*Reading Myself* 12). For the boundaries of what a writer can express are not only defined by individual creativity or inspiration, but they are also culturally determined. The "system of constraints" and "habits of expression", to which Roth refers in the interview, are both private and collective limitations of what can be meaningfully expressed. As Gonzalez points out, Roth's experiments with content and form can be seen as challenging "cognitive obstacles", as in the fusions of "his fictional, and his actual, biographical world", which encourage readers to contemplate the truth-value of his novels (63). Likewise, Ann Basu claims that Roth often tests American myth-making, notions of national and masculine identity or generic boundaries in his novels (9-11). Following what Sacvan Bercovitch has called the hermeneutic of non-transcendence, this study illuminates how Roth's fiction engages the boundaries of what is ideologically conceivable in American culture by probing the limits of his own imagination.

Although Roth's own comments about the political dimensions of his fiction are rather ambivalent, a scholarly tendency has emerged in recent years to place Roth solidly in the American non-conformist tradition. In fact, it is especially Philip Roth's later work starting with the *American Trilogy* (*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*) in the 1990s that has spawned a lot of academic research on Roth's status as a political writer (Brauner, *Philip Roth* 16). According to Derek Parker Royal, the central characters in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist* belong to "a long line of American literary figures" struggling with the promise of America, which enables Roth to excavate the "more troubling side of the American Dream" ("Pastoral Dreams" 202). Ross Posnock argues in his monograph *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (2006) that Roth's provocative style resists "bourgeois" mentalities in American culture (90-92). Elaine Safer explains in *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* (2006) how Roth's humorous stance enables him to mock American culture, in particular its history and the "private obsessions of its denizens", exposing the "hypocrisies and foibles of our time" (15-16). Catherine Morley concludes in *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction: John Updike, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo* (2008) that "Roth's ironic epic of re-

turn and wrath engages with, consumes, and demythologizes the foundational myths of the American people” (114). A more recent view of Roth as an oppositional writer is presented by Aimee Pozorski in her study *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)* (2011). Pozorski maintains that Roth’s later work is informed by numerous tensions, which testify to “Roth’s powerful way to illuminate the failure of the American project overall” (9). Drawing on trauma theory, Pozorski shows how Roth’s later fiction consistently returns to the nation’s origins in the American Revolution in order to reveal the traumatic character of the American experiment (7-10). She places Roth firmly in a long tradition of oppositional writers who have denounced the ever-present gap between the utopian dream of America’s promise and the bleak realities of the present. Considered from such a perspective, Roth is fundamentally at odds with public representations of America’s foundational ideals, which tend to cloud the fact “that America is founded on fractious trauma” (12). For David Brauner, such evaluations entail a “canonization” of Philip Roth in the American non-conformist tradition (“Canonization” 488).

The common denominator of such a view is the presupposition that American writing at its best should assess whether American society lives up to its ideals and promises. As Bercovitch points out, there is a longstanding tradition in American Studies to represent American literature as oppositional writing. According to this scholarly consensus, which Bercovitch has termed the *hermeneutics of transcendence*, literary works transcend the boundaries set by the culture from which they emerge. In other words, the paradigm of the oppositional writer is based on the premise that the American artist can actually take a step back from the world he inhabits to scrutinise American society from a critical distance and to point out its virtues and its wrongs. By contrast, Bercovitch proposes, in what he considers to be a *hermeneutics of non-transcendence*, to refrain from an ideological celebration of transgression and to determine instead in which ways literary works both affirm and resist their ideological frameworks. He has questioned the once widely held assumption that writers can explore the culture they live in from such a detached position without being influenced by the ideologies that shape their cultural environment. For Bercovitch, this is not to disqualify the impressive amount of work by scholars writing in this oppositional tradition, but it is to rephrase the question of an artist’s relationship to the American Dream, also by building on the substantial work done by these critics. Instead of asking in what ways Roth’s work opposes the American ideology, it may be asked in how far it both affirms and resists the culture from which it originates. David Brauner’s observation that Roth’s historical novels represent American ideals in a very ambivalent manner serves as a starting point for such an analysis. As Brauner demonstrates, these novels both cele-